

Kentucky's Native Peoples

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The native peoples historically associated with Kentucky have been the Shawnee, the Cherokee and the Chickasaw. These are the largest of the tribes associated with the Commonwealth although there were many smaller nations.

The word "Shawnee" is from the Algonquian Sawanwa, which means "person of the south." The Shawnee were the southernmost of the Algonquian-speaking peoples. From the 1600s throughout the 1800s, the Shawnee lived mostly in Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia. By the mid 1700s, more than 3,000 Shawnee lived in dozens of villages along the Scioto, Ohio and Mad rivers in the Old Northwest. This territory included all the land of the United States west of Pennsylvania and northwest of the Ohio River and covered all of the modern states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin, as well as the northeastern part of Minnesota – more than 260,000 square miles (673,000 km²). This area was considered the center of the Shawnee nation. The Shawnee were a smaller group than the Cherokee and had more antagonistic relations with Europeans. As a result, the Shawnee people were eventually scattered and found homes among other native groups and frequently adopted the traditions of these host tribes. Few Europeans or Shawnee documented the traditional Shawnee lifeways.

The Cherokee speak an Iroquoian language and are distant ancestral relations of the Iroquois of New York and Canada. In their own language, the Cherokee call themselves Aniyunwiya (a-ni-yoon-wi-ya), which means "real people" or "principal people." They probably got the name "Cherokee" from the neighboring Creek, whose word Tciloki (chi-lo-ki) means "people of a different speech." At its greatest extent, Cherokee land included most of southwestern Kentucky. The Cherokee adopted many characteristics of European pioneers and established newspapers and developed their own alphabet. This and their emphasis on education helped in the maintenance of tribal history and documentation.

The Chickasaw language is categorized by linguists as part of the Muskogean language family. By the 16th century, the tribe had established towns in present-day northern Mississippi and northeastern Alabama, but also controlled additional lands extending to the Jackson Purchase region of Kentucky and western Tennessee. The Chickasaw used this fringe territory as a hunting ground. By the early 1800s, Chickasaw land included the westernmost tip of Kentucky, the western half of Tennessee, most of the top third of Mississippi, and small portions of northern Alabama that bordered Tennessee and Mississippi. The Chickasaw were the smallest tribe of the three and they claimed a smaller area of Kentucky lands at a much earlier date than European contact with Cherokee and Shawnee. Their culture was scarcely documented while they occupied the state but information was collected after the tribe moved further west.